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SOLDIER-POETS OF ENGLAND

Now that the sound of the guns no longer fills our ears, we catch the echoes of voices out of the war. The soldier-poets, who in those last tense months yielded place to the war correspondents, begin again to be heard. A year ago, when Maselfield spoke to us of three young poets, "morning-stars of English poetry," Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Nichols, and Robert Graves, their names were unknown to most of us. Since then Robert Nichols has been among us, telling us of the others, his friends and fellow-soldiers.

The story of these "soldiers three," whose friendship began, it is said, in hospital, reads like an olden tale. All three have been through the war and come back wounded: Robert Nichols was thrown out of active service after the battle of Loos; Siegfried Sassoon has fought three times in France and once in Palestine; Robert Graves, picked up for dead on the battlefield, as his poem "Escape" tells us, cried out: "I'm not dead. I'm damned if I'll die!" A fourth there is who belongs in spirit to this fellowship: Charles Hamilton Sorley, killed in action October, 1915, at the age of twenty, leaving the songs that fill the slender book, *Marlborough*. Of his death Maselfield has said that it is the greatest loss sustained by English literature during the war.

What have they to tell us, these poets who have been in hell? That is our first, and, as yet, our only question. We may experience this poetry; we cannot now evaluate it. We stand too close to it for finality of judgment; in the case of three of the four, we deal with an expression as yet incomplete. The quality of each poet is indeed utterly distinct: Robert Graves, the elf-poet, of swift witcheries and haunting mockeries; Robert Nichols, wrestling with "ardours and endurances" in verse that often falters, yet through sheer integrity achieves such piercing realizations as "The Day's March" and "The Assault." Siegfried Sassoon, master of magic and music, overmastered by his own intensities. But it is not comparison or verdict that their poetry first demands of us; it is the understanding of their common experience.

A first reading brings no one clear impression. Diversities of mood, contrasts that seem contradictions, challenge our question. It is not simply that each poet gives us a different vision, but that each poet gives us the changing vision of youth grown suddenly old. *Fairies and Fusiliers*,¹ the title of Mr. Graves's little book, suggests its strange world of grim disillusion and childlike fantasy:—

“Where once a nonsense built her nest
With skulls and flowers and all things queer.”

Ardours and Endurances,² *The Old Huntsman*, *Counter-Attack*,³ seize on us, now with images of stark horror, now with glimpses of mystic beauty. Siegfried Sassoon is the very spirit of paradox. One moment, in “Glory of Women,” he turns fiercely on us:—

“You love us when we’re heroes, home on leave,
Or wounded in a mentionable place.
You worship decorations; you believe
That chivalry redeems the war’s disgrace.”

And on the next page, in “The Hawthorn Tree,” he has plucked out the very heart of the woman who waits at home:—

“Not much to me is yonder lane
Where I go every day;
But when there’s been a shower of rain
And hedge-birds whistle gay,
I know my lad that’s out in France
With fearsome things to see
Would give his eyes for just one glance
At our white hawthorn tree.

.
“Not much to me is yonder lane
Where *he* so longs to tread;
But when there’s been a shower of rain
I think I’ll never weep again
Until I’ve heard he’s dead.”

Amid this bewilderment of moods, irony and pity, horror and ecstasy and mirth, one note is significantly silent. The first

¹*Fairies and Fusiliers*, by Robert Graves. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

²*Ardours and Endurances*, by Robert Nichols. New York: Frederick A. Stokes.

³*The Old Huntsman and Counter-Attack*, by Siegfried Sassoon. New York: E. P. Dutton.

singers of the war, from Hardy to Kipling, proclaimed the justice of our cause, "the faith and fire within us." American war verse has for the most part exalted patriotism at the expense of poetry. But of war aims these poets who have fought the war have not a word to say. Theirs is none of the exultation of the "1914" Sonnets of Rupert Brooke:—

"Now God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour!"

At moments, indeed, these soldier-poets see no outcome. Robert Graves writes of "The Next War":—

"Wars don't change except in name;
The next one must go just the same."

Yet in the war itself they have found a cause, not proclaimed in capitalized abstractions, but glimpsed as by flares in the night. It is the cause of England, saved by the death of her sons:—

"O youths to come shall drink air warm and bright,
Shall hear the bird cry in the sunny wood,
All my Young England fell to-day in fight:
That bird, that wood, was ransomed by our blood!"⁴

It is the cause of redemptive sacrifice:—

"Once more our anguished way we take
Toward our Golgotha; to make
For all our lovers sacrifice."⁵

It is the cause of life itself, of the very springs of poetry—the cause that Lord Dunsany describes in that most moving preface to *The Last Book of Wonder*:—

"It comes to this: that though we are all killed there will be songs again, but if we were to submit and so survive there could be neither songs nor dreams, nor any joyous free things any more."

We cannot follow the war experiences of these poets without pausing over their poems of before the war. Theirs is the poetry of "youth's encounter," the insatiate, rebellious adventuring depicted in the novels of Compton Mackenzie and David Lawrence and the rest. Mr. Nichols, in his introduction to *Counter-Attack*, has described the Siegfried Sassoon of 1914, with his passion for

⁴*Ardours and Endurances.*

⁵*Ibid.*

poetry, for music, for hunting. *The Old Huntsman*, that fine Raeburn-like portrait that gives its name to his earlier volume, is touched with affectionate memory; echoes of the huntsman's horn, of Bach fugues and Beethoven symphonies, haunt his later war-torn poems. The Robert Nichols of 1914 finds his fullest expression in *A Faun's Holiday*, begun at Oxford in the spring of 1914. With something of the Milton of *L'Allegro* in its dancing rhythms, and more of Keats in its rioting imagery, it has the wayward restlessness of movement and of mood that stamps it as surely as its date. The Faun himself, haunted by foreshadowings of the fall of the old gods, what is he but the spirit of youth in 1914, vainly seeking to re-live the old pagan beauty "into which the soul with all its maladies has passed"? *A Faun's Holiday*, "finished" in 1917, remains a fragment from a shattered world.

Of these voices from before the war, the clearest is that of Charles Hamilton Sorley. The poetry of this schoolboy of eighteen has a melodic and rhythmic loveliness that is the expression of a spirit "strange and unsatisfied and sweet." In his response to the beauty of wood and down, in his assertion of the right of youth to freedom and striving and pain, his voice is at one with the others. He is set apart from them by that secret sense of dedication so movingly expressed in "Expectans Expectavi," and, above all, by the sheer joyousness of his singing—the joyousness that rings through his battle-song, "All the hills and vales along":—

"On, marching men, on
To the gates of death with song. . .
Strew your gladness on earth's bed,
So be merry, so be dead."

To Sorley, whom the gods loved, it was given to die young and glad. And we know that his spirit still lives "on the rain-blown hill,"⁶ where once he found his God.

From Sorley we must turn to the two whose poetry is a continuous record of their war experience. The first part of *Ardours and Endurances* is a cycle of war poems, for the most part dated, from "Summons" to "Aftermath." In Siegfried Sassoon's two volumes, the development, though unmarked by plan or date, would be traceable even without his friend's eagerly interpretative introduction. Mr. Nichol's own "Farewell to Place of Comfort" pictures, with something of the poignant

⁶"Sorley's Weather," by Robert Graves.

quiet of Masfield's "August, 1914," the golden evening, the brimmed twilight pools, the calm of release "from all the former and the later pain," the departure:—

"Farewell! Farewell! There is no more to do.
We have been happy. Happy now I go."

That first strange happiness dominates the early war poems of Sassoon—the "paradise poems," his brother-poet calls them. Sometimes it is the return of the old ecstasy of beauty:—

"I keep such music in my brain
No din this side of death can quell."

Again it is the longing that re-creates the beauty that it seeks, as in the already familiar lines, "To Victory,"—

"Return to greet me, colours that were my joy. . . ."

And there are hints of a beauty that is not only memory but discovery, as in "Absolution,"—

"The anguish of the earth absolves our eyes
Till beauty shines in all that we can see."

The war goes on; the beauty darkens. The poet cries out, in "A Mystic as Soldier":—

"I lived my days apart,
Dreaming fair songs for God,
By the glory in my heart
Covered and crowned and shod.

Now God is in the strife,
And I must seek Him there,
Where death outnumbered life,
And fury smites the air.

I walk the secret way
With anger in my brain.
O music, through my clay,
When will you sound again?"

The paradise poems give place to the poetry of the hell that is war. What war is, what it does to the soul of man, becomes the theme of *Ardours and Endurances*, the purpose of *Counter-Attack*. In the first lines of "Prelude," Sassoon sounds the new *motif* that has banished the old "music":—

"Dim, gradual thinning of the shapeless gloom
Shudders to drizzling daybreak that reveals
Disconsolate men who stamp their sodden boots
And turn dulled, sunken faces to the sky
Haggard and hopeless."

It is a far cry from the drab despair of these war etchings—Barbusse in poetry—to the lurid blood-and-battle hues of Robert Service's sketches. It is the "mystic as soldier" who is the true realist; the lover of beauty who feels the real horror of war, its torture of the spirit. It is this that Robert Nichols has painted in "The Assault," in images sudden and stark as the Verey lights, in the broken rhythms of the pounding heart that waits the "zero" signal. His frequent use of a metre sharp as a bayonet-thrust recalls the naked horror of some of Gibson's poems of *Battle*. Robert Graves is master of a childlike realism—like Mother Goose gone mad—that transforms the trivial or gruesome detail into a symbol of the unutterable horror, such as *Dead Cow Farm*. And Siegfried Sassoon, the sheerest artist of them all, becomes, as Robert Nichols has said, the betrayed idealist, pouring out in tumbled images and dislocated sentences his rage—not at the enemy, but at those ultimate makers of war, Yellow-Pressmen; Junkers in Parliament; women who worship decorations; fierce, bald old men who "die—in bed." Now and then his passion crystallizes in the consummate irony of "They":—

"And the Bishop said, 'The ways of God are strange'";

or of *Lamentations*, with its searing comment on the grief-mad soldier:—

"In my belief
Such men have lost all patriotic feeling."

The irony of Siegfried Sassoon will find its place in the literature not only of this war but of the age-old war against war. Yet irony is not the final word of these soldier-poets. Through the horror that has blotted out the beauty of the world there grows a new sense of brotherhood and of the unity of human life. In "Conscripts" Sassoon tells us, with rare humor, how when "Love chucked his lute away" and "Rhyme got sore heels," when "Rapture and pale Enchantment and Romance" got killed, "the kind, common ones that I despised . . . stood and played the hero to the end." It is love for the common soldiers, "the patient men who fight," that gives to the later poems of *Counter-Attack* and *Ardours and Endurances* a poignancy beyond all the others. It is that very love, Sassoon tells us, that flames out in all his hate of war and its makers:—

"Love drove me to rebel.
Love drives me back to grope with them through hell;
And in their tortured eyes I stand forgiven."

The thought of The Battalion haunts him on sick-leave; the very smell of filthy straw brings back the sight of them at rest and the old torture:—

“Can they guess
The secret burden that is always mine?—
Pride in their courage; pity for their distress;
And burning bitterness
That I must take them to the accursed line.”

In memorable lines, Robert Nichols describes the fellowship of suffering in which he, with many another soldier, has found “Fulfilment”:—

“Was there love once? I have forgotten her.
Was there grief once? grief yet is mine.
O loved, living, dying, heroic soldier,
All, all, my joy, my grief, my love, are thine!”

It is a fellowship to which even the enemy may come. It may be long indeed before we are ready to read Sorley’s sonnet “To Germany”:—

“When it is peace, then we may view again
With new-won eyes each other’s truer form
And wonder. Grown more loving-kind and warm
We’ll grasp firm hands and laugh at the old pain
When it is peace. But until peace, the storm,
The darkness and the thunder and the rain.”

But perhaps we can begin to understand Sassoon’s “Enemies,” the picture of the dead friend, staring in wonder at “the hulking Germans that I shot” for his sake:—

“At last he turned and smiled, and all was well,
Because his face could lead them out of hell.”

For in this fellowship the dead live again—live in all they loved. The uttermost intuition of the poet of *Adonais*,—

“He is a portion of that loveliness
Which once he made more lovely,”—

is echoed by these young poets who have lived with death. With childlike certitude, Robert Graves writes “Not Dead”:—

“Walking through trees to cool my heat and pain,
I know that David’s with me here again.
All that is simple, happy, strong, he is.
Caressingly I stroke
Rough bark of a friendly oak.
A brook goes bubbling by: the voice is his.
Turf burns with pleasant smoke;
I laugh at chaffinch and at primroses.
All that is simple, happy, strong, he is.
Over the whole wood in a little while
Breaks his slow smile.”

In "Our Dead" Robert Nichols affirms his faith:—

"They have not gone from us. Oh no! they are
The inmost essence of each thing that is
Perfect for us; they flame in every star;
The trees are emerald with their presences."

And Siegfried Sassoon catches, in a single image, the spirit of these, "The Undying":—

"And they are dawn-lit trees, with arms upflung,
To hail the burning heavens they left unsung."

Here is the return of the old beauty, not blotted out of life, but quickened into newness of life by the presence of the living dead—just as England, ransomed by their blood, becomes a dearer and lovelier land. And that this deeper beauty of fellowship and of suffering is no momentary mirage is attested by "The Aftermath," the final group of *Ardours and Endurances*. In a series of sea-pictures it images the ebb and flow of the war-worn spirit, fluctuating between weariness and strength, between loneliness and the healing companionship of "Wind, Waters, Stars, and Night." The end is not peace, not forgetting, but "Deliverance":—

"Out of the Night! Out of the Night I come:
Free at last: the whole world is my home:
I have lost self: I look not on myself again,
But if I do I see a man among men."

What have they for us then—these poets of the war? Realization of the war itself their poetry cannot give us: no vicarious experience can. Yet through this poetry we may share a greater thing: the triumph of the human spirit that, without illusion, has lived war and hated war, and out of its sufferings has found fellowship and wrought beauty. For in this poetry lives the very spirit of youth, of—

"Youth, that dying, touched my lips to song."

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